

In their architectural practice, Oliver Lütjens and Thomas Padmanabhan reject defining their work through the concept of identity, which they find too restrictive. Movement, dialogue, and diversity are the preferred subjects. A portrait of an office that refuses to be categorized into a fixed definition.

LA The word “identity” often comes up when talking about an architecture office as a way of defining an aesthetic or vision. But it’s a difficult term to pin down. To start simply: how would you describe your office’s identity today?

TP For us, identity isn’t a starting point, we prefer to move forward step by step. We didn’t find our office with a clear idea of identity. Although, Oliver and I have different backgrounds, we share a fairly similar vision of architecture. That was enough to make our collaboration work.

OL I come from a graffiti background and Thomas has an Indo-German cultural heritage. These backgrounds influences our work in certain ways, but they’re not fundamental to the office’s identity. To us, the term is too limiting. We’d rather let others reflect on that. If there’s one distinguishing aspect of our practice, it’s that we don’t try to remain “true to ourselves.” We do what we love, but always in response to the specific context of Switzerland.

LA So, why did you choose Zurich as your base?

TP We could have stayed in Basel, but Zurich seemed more dynamic, more open. It wasn’t a question of identity but one of structure.

OL Although we are building in Switzerland, we remain connected to the global context. That said, many of our projects could only exist here, for both economic and cultural reasons.

“To us, the term *identity* is too limiting. We’d rather let others reflect on that. [...] We don’t try to express a *self* through our projects. On the contrary, we’re interested in creating some distance from ourselves. While our projects do reflect our sensibilities, we don’t aim to make them mirrors of ourselves.”

LA Your office has grown. Has that transformed its identity?

OL Absolutely. The office is no longer just the two of us. There are over twenty people now, which fosters dialogue. Everyone has a voice, and the projects are discussed collectively.

TP This diversity of cultures, languages, and backgrounds creates real wealth within the office. It becomes a kind of collective identity that is closed in on itself.

LA Would you call this a deliberately *anti-identitarian* position?

OL The idea of identity can be limiting, as if you’re expected to remain the same person forever. We prefer to see our practice as a way to go beyond such limitations. What matters is the project. It’s not personal, it’s shared. If it invites different interpretations, even better. That’s what makes it an open work.

TP We don’t try to express a “self” through our projects. On the contrary, we’re interested in creating some distance from ourselves. While our projects do reflect our sensibilities, we don’t aim to make them mirrors of ourselves. We move forward step by step, drawing from architecture, music, pop culture, etc. All of these influences feed into our work, even if we don’t always know exactly how it comes out.

OL Sometimes it’s unconscious, old things resurface without us knowing how. Architecture is a collective discipline. We work with models that have been passed down through history. There’s always a dialogue with what came before.